



# Washington State Department of Agriculture News Release

For immediate release: Nov. 23, 2004 (04-71)

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## **Trade specialist stationed in Tri-Cities WSDA strategy in place to help boost markets for ag industry**

**OLYMPIA** – Responding to the changing needs of Washington’s diverse food industry, the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) has hired a new international trade specialist in the Tri-Cities and reassigned staff in Olympia to promote agriculture and the food processing industry.

Washington’s agricultural industry is particularly critical to rural communities and has helped stabilize the state’s economic cycles, but faces challenges ranging from global competition to mergers and industry consolidation. To address these challenges, the 2004 Legislature supported WSDA’s request to place another trade specialist in Eastern Washington, continue funding local representatives in China and Southeast Asia, and for the first time, to have a staff person assigned to developing the competitiveness and domestic market opportunities of Washington’s food companies.

Over one-third of Washington’s food industry depends upon export markets. To assist growers and food processors of Eastern Washington export their products, WSDA has hired Rebecca Weber as an international trade specialist to work out of the WSU Tri-Cities campus in Richland.

Weber, a Ritzville native and WSU graduate, has worked for more than nine years in Washington, D.C. for the U.S. Grains Council as the manager of international operations for Asia. She also has worked at the USDA Foreign Agricultural Service as an international affairs specialist and brings great knowledge and experience with USDA’s export programs. Weber is meeting with agricultural commodity commissions, trade organizations and companies that are currently exporting or are interested in exports.

Weber’s position makes WSDA assistance more accessible to Eastern Washington companies. In cooperation with WSDA’s trade specialists in Olympia and Yakima, and its local representatives in Japan, Taiwan, China and Southeast Asia, Weber will help identify export opportunities, introduce buyers to Washington companies, and help these companies access federal trade promotion programs.

“Our evolving strategy reflects the importance of fostering the food and agriculture industry statewide and recognizes the importance of economic development in rural areas,” said Valoria Loveland, WSDA director. “The Tri-Cities office allows the agency to work with a much-expanded list of small and medium companies in that area that can use our trade experience in matching buyers and sellers.”

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In the fiscal year ending June 30, 2004, Marketing staff and its contractors assisted Washington companies in \$54.3 million in sales, generating \$2 million in tax revenue to Washington state. Since 1998, WSDA staff has assisted over \$385 million in export sales.

### **Food processing and value-added products**

Recently, the food processing industry has been recognized as one of the key economic sectors for attention by state economic development agencies. Maintaining the competitiveness of this sector is critical to the agricultural industry.

To assist in these efforts, Eric Hurlburt, a 14-year veteran of WSDA's Marketing program, is now in charge of food industry development for WSDA. Hurlburt's strategy includes working with other state and federal agencies, industry organizations and companies to develop "value-added" food processing to diversify and increase the profitability of small farmers. Hurlburt also supervises the department's Small Farm and Direct Marketing program that works with smaller producers to find domestic market opportunities.

"We're committed to assisting small businesses in rural areas," Loveland said. "By using federal grants, participating in trade missions, and wisely using funding provided by the Legislature, we are able to make a difference in creating more agricultural sales and jobs."

The WSDA Marketing program consists of several related efforts including:

- The International Marketing program to assist companies with exports and provide input for US and foreign government efforts to remove trade barriers. The staff includes contract representatives in Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia/SE Asia and China.
- The Small Farm and Direct Marketing program to assist small-scale farmers and facilitate the development of direct marketing opportunities.
- Support for the *From the Heart of Washington* program, which is transitioning to a non-profit organization. It has been instrumental in building consumer support for local foods.
- Numerous development activities, including voicing support for agriculture on developing the food industry, transportation to improve access to markets, and infrastructure issues.

For more information on how WSDA is assisting in the development of the state's food and agriculture industry, contact Eric Hurlburt at [ehurlburt@agr.wa.gov](mailto:ehurlburt@agr.wa.gov) or (360) 902-1933. The Marketing program's Web site is at <http://agr.wa.gov/Marketing>.

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